

**ECO-POETRY AND THE NIGERIAN POET: A STUDY OF SOME SELECTED POEMS
IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *DELTA BLUES* AND CHRISTIAN OTOBOTEKERE'S
*BEYOND SOUND AND VOICE***

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Abstract

This research examines the relationship between Eco-poetry, Ecocriticism, and the Nigerian poet. It looks into the concern of Ecocriticism as an aspect of literature that bases on the primary concern of man in his physical environment. Ecocritical writings are located in the margin between man and nature. Literary scholars have adopted ecocritical writings as a means of contributing to the preservation of nature and man's physical environment. This research investigates the extent to which eco-poets in Nigeria have, through their writings, portrayed serious concern for the protection of the environment from anti-natural and ecological activities such as bush burning, soil excavation, man-made erosion, oil spillage, artificial desertification, pollution, destruction of hills, mountains, and uncoordinated construction of houses. This work set out to study the contributions of Ecocriticism as a branch of literature from an interdisciplinary point of view where literary scholars analyse texts that illustrate environmental concerns in various ways with their subject matter as nature. The theoretical framework on which this study is based is Ecocriticism. During the course of investigations and research, the researchers discovered that poetry could bring about a certain level of control to man-made ecological problems. They also discovered that the world is basically dependent on the continual and peaceful co-existence of man and nature. The researchers therefore, located a strong concern of the Nigerian poets for the predominant ecological problems saddling the society. They also identified an undaunting effort on the parts of the Nigerian poets understudy to point out the hazards posed by ecological problems. Tanure Ojaide's, *Home Songs*, *Delta Blues*, Christian Obotokere's *Beyond sound and Voice* and *Live2lives* are typical used to carry out this study.

Keywords: Eco-poetry, Nigerian poet, Ecocriticism

Introduction

Eco-literature is a term given to the study of literature and environment. Ecocriticism is also a critical school of thought that has its primary concern on man's physical environment and ecology. It is also a branch of literature that studies the earth, ecosystem and its need to be preserved. Ecocritical writings have their focus on the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.

Ecocriticism originated from Meeker as an idea which he called "Literary ecology" in 1972 and was later coined 1993 as an "ism" by William Rueckert. The study of literature and the influence of environment on literature could be termed "Ecocriticism". The major proponents of this critical

school of thought include William Rueckert, (1978) Barry Commoner, Cheryll Glotfelty, Annette Kolodny and Gerald Hopkins. However, in 1996 the interdisciplinary studies of literature and the environment began to be cited in journal publications and collection of essays in the year 1996 Glotfelty and Fromm edited the first collection of essays and anthology to introduce a comprehensive critical outline on ecocriticism. Many literary scholars saw the term as an avenue to discuss ecological problems and its effects, but it primarily functions as a literary and cultural theory. The intent of this school of thought was to focus on the application of ecology and ecological concept of literature.

Cheryl Glotfelty described the concept of Ecocriticism in these words: Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (9). Barry Commoner (1917) argued that Ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his essay titled: "Literature and Ecology."

However, William Ruckert, opined that Ecocriticism is the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature (107). This literary school of thought looks at literary works of writers who have embedded aspects of nature (man's physical environment) and its need to be preserved. Therefore Ecocritics are literary scholars who are profoundly interested in the preservation of the physical environment and how literary writers reflect this interest in their works of literature. They also explore the extent to which literary writers expose the devastating consequences of man-made activities on the environment.

Critics and Eco-poets investigate in the course of their critical work, they look at the extent to which writers advocate for the protection and preservation of the environment. These writers and critics write to expose magnitude of man's unwholesome activities on the environment through anti-natural and ecological means such as bush burning, pollution, artificial desertification, man-made erosion, indiscriminate soil excavation, gullies, destruction of natural hills mountains and vallies, construction of planless buildings, and artificial filling of streams seas and rivers with sand. Over the years Nigerian literary writers like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Ken Saro Wiwa, Isidore Okpewho, Kaine Agary, Chiemeka Garricks, Christian Otobotekere, Chuma-Udeh Ngozi, Ogaga Oguayade and many others have contributed immensely to growth and development of Ecocriticism in the Nigerian context.

Engelhardt James in *The Language Habitat: an Eco-poetry Manifesto* believes that ecocritics are literary scholars whose writings are based on the preservation of nature, man's physical environment and how literary writers reflect these concerns in their works of art. These literary writers or critics look at the extent to which a writer writes to protect or preserve the environment and nature. These critics write to expose man's undue activities on the environment through anti-natural and ecological activities such as bush burning, man-made erosion, soil excavation, artificial desertification, destruction of natural hills, vallies, water bodies, and mountains through road constructions (9).

According to Echezona Ifejirika; Eco-criticism or environmental criticism designates the critical writings which explore the relationship between literature, biological and physical environment by human activities.... (54).

Lawrence Buck opined that ‘Eco-critics is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyses the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation (239).

One of the primary concerns of the ecocritics is to delve into the exact meaning of nature and appreciate its existence. All ecocritics share an environmentalist motivation in one way or the other. The concerns of ecocriticism become glaringly explicit in the operational definition of Camilo Gornides quoted in Engelhardt James’s *The Language Habitat: an Ecopoetry Manifesto*, ‘The field of enquiry that analyses and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while als motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations (16).’ Ecocriticism analyzes the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, examining how the concept of ‘nature’ is defined, what values are assigned to it and why, and the way in which the relationship between humans and nature is envisioned.

In the front matter for each issue of *ecopoetics*, he also says that the journal is “dedicated to exploring creative-critical edges between writing (with an emphasis on poetry) and ecology (the theory and praxis of deliberate earthlings).” In a sense, *ecopoetics* is an ecotone between these disciplines, between ecology, poetry, and ethnopoetics; *ecopoetics* addresses itself to the concerns of “the theory and praxis of deliberate earthlings. However the study of Ecocriticism applies to the study of literature from the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria which is the part of Nigeria where the two poets have their focus on.

The discovery oil in commercial quantity in olobiri on January 15, 1956 in the Niger-Delta of Nigeria placed Nigeria among the rank of oil producing countries from 1958. The activities of the Multi-nationals as well as the exploitative trends of economic considerations and environmental degradation have fuelled crisis, tension and varied flow of responses as a result of exploitation, ecological problems and corruption dominated the literature of the Niger Delta. G .G Dara observed that; the nations and the people of the Niger Delta have been engaged in another war, a war of verbal weapons to emancipate their territory and natural resources from the avaricious grip of the federal Government and its international allies (3).

To the Niger Deltans, this war also carried through and experienced in the literary lines as major writers and poets interrogate and explicate these excruciating pains they felt in their mind. Writers and Ecopoets from the Niger Delta have advocated for social equality and environmental justice which long eluded the region, since the menace of oil extraction began to rampage the whole of the Niger Delta environment.

In Nigeria, a number of a poets, writers and critics, without the stamp of ecocritics, have traditionally been engaged in nature writing highlighting land issues and environmental evils studying them as the result of the long history of colonialism. However without being called ecocritics, African writers were extremely serious about nature and environment. Niyi Osundare and ken saro wiwa, both belonging to Nigeria, were famous poets along with being committed eco activists. From such perspectives, the position of Tanure Ojaide comes alive as astutely move against the perpetrators of ecological calamity. Christian Ootobotekere brings his experience as a long standing monarch presiding over an ecological disaster area into his poetry. His works bear

sufficient proof of addressing the theme of nature and environment. On this premise, this research intends to investigate the extent of the involvement of the Nigerian poet in fostering postcolonial.

Statement of the Problem

The environment has always played a significant role in every human life and society. By far, one of the most problematic issues the world continues to contend with even beyond the close of the twentieth century is the indescribable vanishing of the nonhuman world. Mankind, however, continues to make concerted efforts to ensure that the other worlds are kept alive since the human world solely depends on them for sustenance and existence. This has necessitated the engagement of sensitive writers and scholars in multiple and interdisciplinary discourses in the negotiations of African environment and its resources. As Ali Mazrui says in the first part of his series of documentaries, “Among the Africans, there existed in traditional society a partnership between humans and nature. Some animals were domesticated while others roamed the wild. Humans relied on animals and plants for sustenance—food in crops and fruits, fish and animals, firewood for cooking, timber for building, and more. Man held aspects of nature sacred—mountains, rocks, rivers, trees. The forest was the home of ancestors. In the religions of Africans, nature became an integral aspect of their spirituality in the form of groves, thus giving the environment a spiritual dimension (29).” This scholarship investigates the contribution of African poets in tempering down the global environmental crisis. It will wade into attempts of poetry to redefine what happens to the environment as it intersects with a multiplicity of issues. It intends to reveal means by which African poets lead their readers to the appreciation of complex relationships that mediate between humans and their environments. Basically this study will investigate through the review of specific poets, the portrayal of recent actions of multinational oil companies out for profit for Western shareholders at the expense of local communities.

Purpose of Study

This study emanates from the firm belief that a true definition of the relationship between human culture and the environment, especially in literature would lead towards an ecologically sustainable human society. The purpose of this scholarship is therefore to investigate the extent African poets have waded into the study of the environment as related to issues of land, culture, agriculture, politics, and economy, among others. It intends to also prod into the ability of the poets to tackle these issues which are related to ownership of land, oppression, and exploitation as well as their ability to draw attention to the environmental call for an “ecology of justice” or human rights that will bring harmony to the relationship between humans and their environment in all spheres.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research work hinges on Ecocriticism. This theory is regarded as the study of literature in relation to man’s physical environment. This literary theory denotes the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. The term ecocriticism has a broad domain and has been expressed through many literary genres. The fundamental role of ecocriticism is to discuss the nature of relationship between man and his natural and to bring a level of control to man’s undue ecological activities to his environment.

Ecocriticism as a critical school of thought is adopted in this research, strongly believes in the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, ecocriticism started

developing in the 1990s. There is a close relation between literature and ecocriticism. This literary criticism is concerned with literature and environment or man's relationship with physical environment are reflected in literature. Ecocriticism originated from Meeker as an idea which he called "Literary ecology" in 1972 and was later coined 1993 as an "ism" by William Rueckert. The study of literature and the influence of environment on literature could be termed "Ecocriticism". The major proponents of this critical school of thought include William Rueckert, (1978) Barry Commoner, Cheryl Glotfelty, Annette Kolodny and Gerald Hopkins. However, in 1996 the interdisciplinary studies of literature and the environment began to be cited in journal publications and collection of essays in the year 1996 Glotfelty and Fromm edited the first collection of essays and anthology to introduce a comprehensive critical outline on ecocriticism. Many literary scholars saw the term as an avenue to discuss ecological problems and its effects, but it primarily functions as a literary and cultural theory. The intent of this school of thought was to focus on the application of ecology and ecological concept of literature.

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Methodology

In carrying out this research, the researcher made use of both primary and secondary texts and anthologies. The researcher adopted qualitative research method. In the course of investigating how the Nigerian Eco-poet presented the abuse of environment by man, the researcher also highlighted the opinions proffered by other writers and poets concerning ecocriticism as their point of interest.

Ecological Analysis of Selected Poems from Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues* and Christian Otobotekere's *Beyond Sound and Voice*

The Eco-poet is of the infinite belief that poetry is the best means of directly addressing an environment in crisis. This simply means that for a poem or poet to be tagged "eco," there must be a true concern for so many elements of nature in the writing. The critical concern must be on everything, the Eco-poem questions everything starting from the ink marking the lines of his own works to the white spaces in between the lines, to the paper upon which the poem is printed or scribbled because come to think of it, the paper industry is one of the country's largest polluters after all. Ecocriticism analyses the role natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, thereby examining how nature is defined and what values that are assigned to it.

Ecocritical approaches confront the conflict between science's claim that it delivers descriptions of nature that are essentially value-neutral, and the tendency of cultural analysis to see research as framed by specific ideological political and economic interests that do provide it with a set of more or less explicit values. But if the context out of which scientific research emerges is shaped by certain values, it does not necessarily follow that the results of this research will lend support to these values, a distinction that few cultural analyses of science bother to make. Due to its epistemological power as well as its pervasive cultural influence in the West and increasingly other parts of the world, the scientific description of nature should be one of the cornerstones of ecocriticism, one that is usually confronted and compared with literary visions of the environment. This confrontation enables not only an assessment of how scientific insight is culturally received and transformed (rather than 'constructed'), it also allows the critic to see where literature deviates-or, in some cases wishes or attempts to deviate-from the scientific approach in view of particular aesthetics and ideological goals.

Echezona Ifejirika opined that Ecocriticism or environmental criticism designates the critical writings which explore the relationship between literature, biological and physical environment by human activities...(54).

Tanure Ojaide can comfortably be addressed as a poet, novelist, social and environmental writer and critic. He writes in core agitation of the extent of degradation and pollution caused by the oil exploration companies in the Niger Delta communities. Through the eyes of his characters and personas, he shows the disposition of the Federal Government in handling the environmental and social issues caused by the multinational companies and oil expatriates. In a bid to achieve, the objective of creating awareness on the consequences of continued unwelcomed activities on the ecosystem in Niger Delta.

Bell oil knew very well that there was a
Blowout but did not ask its fire-fighting team to put out the
fire. The Uto River was literarily burning. Evergreen plant
dry leaves, and shrubs that stood by the river all became
Combustible, the poisonous methane gas fumes engulfed
plants, wildlife and humans around for days (261).

The poet projected the problems that belaboured the Niger Delta inhabitants. The Ecopoet becomes one with the natural world and the poem itself an embodiment of ecology representing the microcosmic ecosystem in which itself dwells.

Whence this tripping tune
Of voice unseen
Falling like February rain
On tingled grass
Kpara kpara kpara kpara
From what top –most twig
Or innermost roost
Do you sprinkle
Your potion of love

Upon my field of
Time-scorched reminiscences?
Ah, two-toned warbler
In this oriolling wood,
Could u, indeed,
By magic of melody
Make me relieve the past
In the leafy-cool of forest,
Or, pinnate as I am,
Between voice and thought
Unburden my heart.
O forest One,
Could be i too
Be welcome
To a nest
At home
If I warbled
In my arid savannah(15).

This poem tries to show the poet's utmost interest in appreciating nature and its essence. Otobotekere's ecopoetics reflects larger social paradigms as he views the eco problems belabouring his people from the viewpoint of a sublime soul. His sense of duty combines with his ecological thinking and feelings to generate a site of political resistance. He pours out his life experiences in awesome spectacles of poetic thought that exude the strength, tranquillity and overwhelming beauty of natural scenes. He however dwells on the tension springing out by the disturbance and distortion of the natural tranquillity and beauty of the landscape by human interference. He portrays the diverse destructive forms unleashed on the ecosystem and the consequent devastation the beautiful landscape in a profound poetic Sublime.

Tanure Ojaide and Christian Otobotekere's presents their poetry to serve as a means by which humans can assert their connection to the natural world by both literal and literary means. The ecological nature of their poems makes it not only a tool for change, but also a mirror in which we can see reflected the ways we as humans interact, perceive, and respond to our environment. It also reveals something about the desires of a soul who see the imperfections in our present ways and desires above every other thing to change these through working out in words what he feels. Their works are therefore a compact body of expressions presented a multitude of poetic forms. They conceive of poetry to be a pathway into the hearth of the environment and possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation.

However, Tanure Ojaide *Delta blues and Home songs* are two anthologies of poems which were deeply concerned about the ravages of oil exploration in the Niger Delta that has brought about displacement of indigenes from their ancestral homes. He decries this profligate which assaulted and harmed the natural environment in various ways and to varying degrees, yet wholesome and holistic attributes and attitudes of people of the Niger Delta even as they adapted to major problems that faced them.

Given the steadily increasing urgency of environmental problems troubling his immediate surroundings, Christian Otobotekere in his poems openly adopts the ecological imperative for public sensitivity and social change. He adopts *Ecopoetics as a weapon for* investigating the complex relationship between the artifice and the natural world. His poems relate to nature as an outpouring of a deep wellspring of meaning. Each of these poems stand out in their distinct ways expressing the process of rematerializing language through sound effects and other formal devices as a sophisticated response to addressing nature's predicaments. In his collection of poetry, *Beyond Sound and Voice*, the reader first encounters the deep philosophical leanings of a man completely bonded to the nuances of his environment. In *Lake Bird*, he presents the unspoiled beauty of nature:

In the heart of creation
Unfolds a new Eden,
Where, all nature is fresh.
And streams and waters are
Excitingly soft and cool
Where also lilies white
And water lotus sway
In the sweet fanning breeze
And lustre in newest bloom
In nature's own sanctuary (3).

Seemingly, the Poet King rightfully views the ecology as a macrocosmic home shared by humans and several million other species of living things and inanimate beings in the planet Earth. Thus, his *Ecopoetics* brings about enlightenment on the means of preserving this home.

Otobotekere's and Ojaide's poetry investigates the underlying ecological values and projects such enquiries as to what, precisely, is meant by the word 'nature', and whether the examination of "place" should be a distinctive category in poetry. Much like class, gender or race, he upholds nature as a genre worth expositing. His adoption of an ecophilosophical position with apparent espousal of *ecopoetics* as a measure of literary value tended to prevail over all other ideological and historical assessment of nature made by any Nigerian poet over the years. His works compliment an epoch of the modifications in *ecopoetic genre's* representation of nature in the Nigerian literary scene. In *Rural Garden*, the poet once again, demonstrates the elaborate interconnectedness of the world in which we live. In one breath he is chatting on about the intense beauty of a garden in a countryside and the next, he is transported into the world of the singing birds and aural captivation of nature's charm:

Here, melody of thought
And reflex of spiralling echo
Conspire to fling me up
Into the realms far beyond-
Beyond earthly radar.
Beyond sound and voice (12).

Nature exists in twos for the *eco poetics* king. This symbolises the binaries of the union between man and nature. The symbiotic relationship between man and his environment encapsulates the poet in *Twin Birds*. The duality of the relationship between the two birds becomes symbolic of the

human existing in an innate environment. He emphasises the prototypical relationship of the birds and its effect on the world around them as unusually pleasant. His use of basic ecology to express nature cannot be over emphasised:

However, Skinner quoted in Barry Peter's Ecocriticism. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary Theory*, declares that:

The contemporary eco-poem is self-aware of itself as a construct, and of the larger role of the poet/poem/poetics in the context of the larger ecosystem of literature and the outside world. a category distinct from beauty: the sublime as the aesthetic of vastness, magnificence, power, and fear....politics has invaded the landscape...the landscape is now a victim of history...history is not only the history of human actions, of causes, but the history of effects, of ecological damage. 'Thus, we see not the soldiers bombing the landscape—action pictures—but the landscape shattered by bombs....Our morality is complicated by the fact that the sky above even the most demonic folly is often exquisitely coloured, and its clouds as breathtakingly pure (47).

Tanure Ojaide and Christian Otobotekere views the ecoproblems belabouring their people from the viewpoint of a sublime soul. They pours out there life experiences in awesome spectacles of poetic thought that exude the strength, tranquillity and overwhelming beauty of natural scenes. They however dwells on the tension springing out by the disturbance and distortion of the natural tranquillity and beauty of the landscape by human interference. They portray the diverse destructive forms unleashed on the ecosystem and the consequent devastation the beautiful landscape in a profound poetic Sublime.

Conclusion

So far we have tried in this paper to highlight aspects of ecocritical perspectives in the works of Tanure Ojaide, and Christian Otobotekere. The most alluring aspect of their poetry is their ability to use their poems to ask moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating his readers to live within boundaries that will be binding over generations.

With the environmentalist inclinations of these poets, they have succeeded in establishing a lasting presence in the Nigerian literary sphere. For Tanure Ojaide and Christian Otobotekere, Eco-poetry is a kind of public duty, which they owe to their people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the country especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The core essence of this discourse is to prove that Otobotekere's poetry intersects with the realities of ecological imperialism and as such has come to be a volatile, reliable voice in Nigerian literature. His poetic panorama has found its place among this expanding matrix of coexistence between man and natural diversity. His works have become a ready yardstick and guide for determining the Nigerian environmental/ecological experience.

The purpose of this research is to explore how Eco- poetry as a body of knowledge is used in addressing the environmental issues like bush burning, air pollution, oil spillage, activities of industries, gas fares, soil excavation and many other man's undue ecological activities thereby portraying the nature of relationship between man and his natural habitat.

This research seeks to examine the role of the Nigerian poet in buttressing environmental concerns. This research work looks at the relationship between man and nature and how the selected Nigerian poets were able to address ecological issues through their poems.

The works of Tanure Ojaide, and Christian Otobotekere are antithetical to the development of capitalism, and predatory individualism in the nation's polity. Thus, they aim at promoting the maintenance of a people's natural and ancestral heritages, they has provided and still do provide us with knowledge about our identities, our environment, our history, and our spirituality.

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